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FAMILY TIES

The Hand of God

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

*"There is no surprise more magical than the surprise of being loved.
It is God's finger on man's shoulder." —Charles Morgan*

At Christmas time I read a story that reminded me about what I think Charles Morgan had in mind. When God touches us on the shoulder, it is a reminder that He is with us all the time. He says, "Here I am. I've been here all along. I love you." There is so much to learn about love, and some of that learning comes through the words and actions of others.

In his story, "The Christmas Cookie Can," Joe Gurneak writes about being upstairs in the attic of his childhood home, after his dad's death, when he came across an old Christmas cookie can his dad used to store extra Christmas light bulbs. As he picked it up, Joe remembered the Christmas when he was 11 years old. While anxious to go sledding, he first needed to shovel the walkways at his own house. And then his mother told his neighbor that Joe would shovel her walkways as well. When he finished after several hours, his neighbor gave Joe a dollar with a 50¢ tip. While he said that was fine, Joe was fuming inside. First he missed out on sledding, and that wasn't much payment for doing such a big job.

While shoveling, Joe found himself thinking about how lonely his neighbor must be and wondering how long it had taken her to get that old. Later that week, she came over and told his mom what a good job Joe had done and brought with her a can loaded with homemade Christmas cookies. They were all for him! As Joe sat munching on his cookies, he figured that shoveling her sidewalk had been a way for him to give her a Christmas gift, one that she could really use. His neighbor died that summer, and Joe never shoveled her sidewalk again.

Joe decided to keep that Christmas cookie can to remind him of what he had figured out so many years ago, the true meaning of Christmas. He dumped the old light bulbs into the trash. As he did so, the piece of paper that had been used as the layer between the cookies and bottom of the can floated into the trash as well. Then he saw something taped to the inside of the can. It was an envelope that included a thank you note *and* a \$20 bill!

While a lovely Christmas story, Joe's experience also reminds me of several great truths about love that work any time of the year. I believe that love is both taught and caught. From Joe's mother, we can see how she taught him the importance of helping one's neighbor. While fulfilling that responsibility, Joe's own generosity sprang forth; and he actually found enjoyment in something he had not wanted to do. Afterward, Joe felt satisfaction and a kind of love toward his neighbor. And his neighbor? She showed love expressed as appreciation, combining it with an element of surprise. That surprise was magical, even so many years later. It was the hand of God on Joe's shoulder!



Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and a licensed marriage and family therapist.

Adapted from Canfield, Jack and Hansen, Mark Victor. *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Christmas Treasury for Kids*. Florida: Health Communications, Inc., 2002.